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"MAULANA SAYS THE PROPHET IS HUMAN, NOT GOD"
Milads *and hierarchies among Bengali Muslims in Lisbon*

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out among Bengali Muslims in Lisbon. It specifically examines a ceremony, called *milad* that is performed on certain occasions such as the opening of a shop or the inauguration of a house. What it is intended to argue is that *milads* are a good metaphor to understand current debates among the Bengalis about what Islam "should be" and what, as a Muslim, one should do. Based on this ethnographic exercise, it is argued that the modernization rhetoric on social change and transformations in religious practices and religiosity, that is currently prominent in migration and religion studies should be substituted by a phenomenology of Islam in the context of migration.

« Maulana dit que le Prophète est humain, pas Dieu ».
Milads *et hiérarchies parmi les Bengalis musulmans de Lisbonne*

Cet article repose sur un travail de terrain ethnographique auprès de musulmans bengalis de Lisbonne, notamment sur une cérémonie appelée *milad*, célébrée en certaines occasions telles l'ouverture d'une boutique ou l'inauguration d'une maison. Ces *milads* peuvent être vus comme une métaphore permettant de comprendre les débats actuels concernant la vision de l'islam des Bengalis et ce que, en tant que musulman, chacun devrait faire. À partir de cette étude de cas, on propose de remplacer la rhétorique habituelle de la modernisation sur le changement social et les transformations des pratiques religieuses et de la religiosité, actuellement dominante dans les recherches sur les migrations et les études religieuses, par une phénoménologie de l'islam en contextes migratoires.

« Maulana diz que o Profeta é humano, não Deus ».
Milads *e as hierarquias entre os Bengalis muçulmanos de Lisboa*

Este artigo baseia-se num trabalho etnográfico realizado junto dos muçulmanos Bengalis em Lisboa, mais concretamente, sobre uma cerimónia designada pelo termo *milad* que é realizada em ocasiões como a abertura de uma loja ou a inauguração de uma casa. O que se pretende argumentar é que estes *milads* são « bons para pensar » sobre os actuais debates em torno daquilo que os Bengalis pensam ser o Islão e aquilo que, enquanto muçulmanos, pensam ser o comportamento « correcto ». Este exercício etnográfico leva a propor uma fenomenologia do Islão em contextos migratórios em contraposição às retóricas da modernização em torno das mudanças sociais e transformações nas práticas religiosas e na religiosidade que têm sido comuns nas pesquisas sobre migrações e estudos religiosos.

In late April 2005, right in the middle of a second period of fieldwork amongst Bengali Muslims in Lisbon, I was leaving the *Baitul Mukarram Masdjid*, the Bangladeshi mosque, to attend a *milad* with Mashiur, Kari and a group of *Jama'at Tablighi*. I was surprised by the Tablighis presence because it is a well-known fact that they are very critical of such a ceremony. Having this in mind I approached

Ishmael, an anglo-pakistani Tablighi, and asked him if he was attending the *milad*. "Attending what?", he replied back clearly uncomfortable. "The Inauguration party of a house", I emended. "Ah! to that, yes, yes."

As in other situations, the substitution of the word *milad* by something more descriptive was a necessary effort to maintain the conversation with my interlocutor. Ishmael's reaction was a clear demonstration of the difficulty and criticism that such missionaries have towards this ceremony, criticisms that were not exclusive to them. In fact, several Bengali Muslims had similar opinions regarding the performances of these *milads*. They too considered this a non-Islamic practice and therefore something that should not be done. Others, like Mashiur and Jahangir, continue to support such a practice considering it indispensable on certain occasions. One then has to ask what are the differences between those who support such a ceremony and those who criticise it? What are the arguments? And in a more general sense what do these debates tell us about the way we approach Islam, Muslims and migration? This article is an effort to answer these three interrelated questions, and the first step is to describe what exactly is a *milad*.

Milads in Lisbon

The word *milad* derives from the Arabic *mawlid* and it means the time, place or date of birth. It usually designates the birthday of a person but it is especially used in the case of Prophet *Muhammad*. Among Bengali Muslims in Portugal *milad* is a word used to designate two interrelated ceremonies: the first one is the *milad-un-nabi* or *milad-sharif*, which literally means the birthday of the Prophet, that occurs on the 12th *Rabi al-Awwal*[1], the third month of the lunar Islamic calendar; the second is just described as a *milad* or a *milad mahfil* (meeting) and is a ceremony that can take place on different occasions.

The *milad-un-nabi* is usually celebrated as the other rhythms of Islam, like the *id-ul-fitr* (the feast of the end of Ramadan) or the *id-ul-adha* (the feast of sacrifice)[2].

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[1] Besides the fact that no one knows for sure the date of birth of the Prophet this has been assumed as the proper date to celebrate the occasion. Furthermore, this celebration has an ambiguous value because it also marks the death of Prophet Muhammad.

[2] The *milad-un-nabi* is today part of the national celebrations in Bangladesh. As in other contexts (Tapper & Tapper 1988, Cardeira da Silva 1997) *milads* are celebrated at a national level with the participation of the Head of state as well as other major representatives of the government and almost all political parties. This participation is usually done first by addressing the population through public speeches and also with the organization of *mahfils*, religious gatherings, where the prophet's deeds and opinions are discussed in order to understand the importance and the relevance of the day. Some colourful processions are also held in several parts of the cities, as the one organised by the *Jaker party* in Dhaka in 2004. Furthermore and reinforcing the political importance of the occasion, the day is declared a public holiday and atop all public buildings the national flag is raised. The political centrality of this ceremony has to be contextualized with similar efforts developed by political authorities on other religious occasions such as the *Id-ul-Adha* and the *Id-ul-Fitr*. The appropriation of these religious occasions by several Bangladeshi political forces is a tendency that acquired an increasing centrality soon after the independence of the country, even by its main responsible Shaykh Mujibur Rahman, the *Bangabandhu* (literally bangla friend), in spite of being highly influenced by nehruvian secularist

It is a mosque-based celebration usually performed during night-time. In the *Islamic Centre of Bangladesh*, particularly in its *Baitul Mukarram* mosque, in Lisbon[3], this celebration occurs after the *salat-ul-mahrib*, the sunset prayer, and it lasts until midnight. Several prayers are recited and hymns are chanted in honour of the Prophet together with a Bengali *bayan* (speech/homily) by the *imam* of the mosque (prayer leader) where the virtuous behaviour of the prophet is presented as a guiding example to all Muslims. This is followed by a final *du'a*, a supplication to God. The night ends with a ceremonial meal of *biriany* or *pulau* (fried rice with vegetables, lamb and spices), and the distribution of some *shinni* (sweets) and occasionally home-made yogurt. The food is prepared inside the mosque by several volunteers, as well as by some Bengali, hired for its maintenance.

Milads, on the other hand, are based upon the prophet's birthday, but are usually performed with much more regularity. However, they are not always peaceful as we will see ahead. A *milad* is commonly performed whenever there is a birth, a marriage, a death or when a person moves to a new house or opens a new business. As in Bangladesh, and as Jean Ellickson (1972: 77) argues in her ethnography of *Shaheenpur* in *Comilla* district, these *milads* are held on any occasion for Thanksgiving, namely "the completion of a new household building, the start of a new shop or business, [. . .], passing a school exam, recovery from an illness, or the birthday of a family member". It is said that it brings blessing or good luck *(baraqu'at)* to those who perform it and therefore to their businesses and homes. The ceremonial sequence is very similar to what happens during the night of *milad-un-nabi*, and the description made by Regula Qureshi (1996) for Muslims living in several parts of South Asia and abroad has several parallels with the case under discussion.

It is usually a devotional assembly, composed of a small reciting group, that collectively presents a sequence of chanted hymns in praise of the Prophet (*na't*),

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ideologies (Huque & Akhter 1987, Ahamed & Nazneen 1990, *inter alia*). For instance, John Thorp 1978, while doing his fieldwork in 1976, remarked that in Dhaka as well as in other cities, the *Milad-un-Nabi* was extensively celebrated through a large number of religious gatherings which were of course encouraged by the Martial Law Authorities, i.e., the generals that took control of the country soon after the assassination of Shaykh Mujibur Rahman, in 1975. Let us recall that in 1972, one year after the independence of the country, the constitution of Bangladesh declared that the fourth pillar of the state policy was secularism, more precisely, *dharma-nirapeksata* (neutrality in religion or religious tolerance). Religion had a smaller public importance then Bengali nationalism. But what was the motivation behind the islamization of the state in a period of only thirty years? Despite the lack of space it is enough to say that the increasing dependency of Bangladesh on foreign aid, especially from Saudi Arabia, was counterbalanced by several pressures to publicly recognise the precedence of Islam over all other religions in the country.

[3] The Bangladeshi mosque, also known informally as *bangla masdjid*, was formalised in October 2004. It occupies a three storey building with a maximum capacity of three hundred people. It is the heir of a very small prayer room created in 2000 by a goup of Bangladeshi migrants, most of them the first to arrive in Portugal in the beginning of the nineties. For the functioning of the mosque an *imam* and a *muezzin* were hired. The first assumes the role of prayer leader and thus all related ceremonial elements and the second makes the call for prayer (*azan*). Both teach *qur'anic* recitation to Bangladeshi children every Saturday morning (for further developments see Mapril 2004).

alternating with spoken homilies (*bayan*) and interspersed with Arabic praise litanies (*durud*). Usually a *milad* begins with a hymn of praise to God (*hamd*), sometimes it is also preceded by *qur'anic* recitation. A salutational hymn to the Prophet (*salam*) followed by an intercessory prayer, a supplication, to God (*du'a*) and a recitation of *al-Fatiha*, the first sura of the *Qur'an*, concludes the event. Among Bengalis living in Lisbon a smaller version is also performed. The *imam* begins by reciting a random part of the *Qur'an* followed by some Bengali *na'ts*[4] in homage of the Prophet. A short homily (*bayan*) is said in Bengali and the ceremony finishes with a supplication (*du'a*)[5].

Since I began my fieldwork, I have attended four *milad* ceremonies and all were quite different. Two were performed on the opening day of shops, one on the inauguration of a new rented house and another during a *mahfil*, a religious gathering organised on the occasion of a visit by a Bengali *imam*, considered by many as a religious scholar (*alim*), to the Bengali mosque. Of all these, two were performed inside the mosque, another inside the new *dhokan* (shop) and the other in the new *bari* (house). One of the *milads* performed inside the mosque was a very interesting case, because it was actually celebrating the "kick off" of a new business. Now, whenever there is the opening of a new shop, its inauguration is usually done inside the commercial space or one can also ask his friends to pray for the business success at the mosque or at home. In the case of Anwar, his decision to do a *milad* inside the mosque was related to a problem with his next-door "neighbours". They were drug users that spent their days consuming heroin. For Anwar, it was a shame (*lojja*) to do a *milad* in such an environment and since the mosque was very close by, he chose to do it inside.

Apart from the *milad* led by the invited prayer leader, all the others were arranged together with the *imam* of the Bangladeshi mosque. Although it could be performed by any Muslim as long as he can recite the *Qur'an*, say some of the hymns in honour of the Prophet, and deliver the other elements described earlier, the Bengali *imam* performed all of these. In all cases, and from what I

[4] Kazi Nazrul Islam is only one example of a Bengali poet that has written very famous *na'ts* which are frequently presented at what has been called by some the Bengali *milad*.

[5] One of the best ethnographic descriptions of such a ceremony was done by John THORP 1978: 110 "… the male members of the household and their neighbours gather in a semi-circle facing towards the west, if this is possible, and the leader sits facing them. Incense and rose water are used to give the session a pleasant and special atmosphere. The leader begins by reciting from the Qur'an, and he then gives a short sermon about Muhammad's observation of this festival [this was performed by Thorps interlocutors in the context of Shab-e-Barat]. During this sermon, the congregation repeatedly chants the opening chapter of the Qur'an that praises Allah and his Prophet. The children present are expected to chant as loudly as possible. At the end of the sermon all stand and with folded arms chant a formal greeting in praise of the prophet which is taken from the Qur'an. Then everyone sits again and prays silently using different short sections of the Qur'an that are well known. Finally, the leader of the gathering offers a particular supplicatory prayer for the good of the host householder. After the prayers have been completed, the host distributes candy made from sap of the Kejur palm tree to the assembled group. The leader of the prayers is then given a more substantial meal of chicken and unleavened rice-flour bread and a small sum of money."

have been told, this is part of the task supposedly done by the *imam*, so nobody has to pay anything since it is included in his income, which is paid by the managing committee of the Bangladeshi mosque. This of course does not mean that, occasionally, people won't give gratuities of diverse kinds. On all four occasions, commensality was a central part of the ceremony. Usually, the promoters of the *milad* organize a meal that is later distributed or shared among the congregation, finishing with the distribution of several and varied sweets. In the case of Anwar, he went to an Indian restaurant and ordered several boxes of sweets that were distributed inside the mosque after the ceremony, together with some bottled waters.

Exploring a brief ethnographic example

The first of the ceremonies mentioned above was performed on February 9, 2003, in a grocery shop that had opened just some days before. Formerly this was a trifles and trinkets shop, quite common in this area of Lisbon, owned by a Portuguese Hindu of Indian background that arrived in Portugal after several years in Mozambique (Ávila & Alves 1993, Malheiros 1996).

Like others before him, the owner was interested in renting the space and thus leaving the business area for others. The context was quite favourable since this is an area of Lisbon that became famous thanks to the presence of several migrant populations that, among other things, have been investing in several businesses and thus any available commercial space is usually taken quite quickly (Mapril 2001, Bastos 2004).

By this time, Shams, a Bengali Muslim from Dhaka, arrived in Portugal in 2001 was looking for a new shop (*dhokan*). He was not satisfied with the previous business he had with a fellow country-man and thus was looking for a new space; his idea was to establish a grocery shop where he would also have a *halal* butcher. Having heard about this available space and since it was big enough for his purpose; he rented it for seven hundred and fifty euros a month (an average rent for commercial spaces in the area). However, since he was facing some documentation problems he could not celebrate the contract. He asked Manir, another Bengali Muslim, with whom he shared a house nearby, to register the business under his company's name. In the next couple of days, Shams, together with some of his house partners cleaned the place, ordered the stalls for the groceries and the freezers for the frozen meat and fish (some days after the owner informed him that he did not want the shop to become a butcher).

In spite of several complications that delayed the delivery of these items, the shop opened on February 1, and Shams immediately posted an advertisement in the *Daily Jugantor*[6]. The advertisement, written in Bengali, Urdu and Portuguese, was annexed at the end of the newspaper. In the first version the supermarket was presented as a place where one could buy *deshi kabar*, Bangladeshi food, while the other two versions of the advertisement noted that it was a shop where one could buy ingredients to do Portuguese as well as Indian dishes.

[6] This is a version of the online Bangladeshi newspaper *Daily Jugantor*, printed in a Bangladeshi owned photocopy shop and sold for 1 €.

As soon as the freezers and the stalls arrived, thus giving it a brand new look, Shams began to spread the information that he was doing a *milad*. It was performed on a Sunday afternoon, after *Salat-ul-Assr*, therefore in the middle of the afternoon. The choice of a Sunday was far from unintentional; most Bangladeshi in Lisbon live and work (some in their own shops and others working for someone else) in the vicinities and thus this is a meeting point for other Bengalis after working hours, on holidays and on Sundays (Mapril 2004). Consequently, to offer a *milad* on a Sunday afternoon guaranteed good participation and therefore good publicity for his new business.

Shams bought and slaughtered some sheep, the meat of which was packed by Moina, the employee, and Manir to be available by the time of the *milad*. They also managed to put aside several packs kept in the freezer in the back room. On such occasions the guests always buy something so he wanted to have available as many products as possible. Furthermore, there were also several bags filled with small luncheon boxes with *murgi* (chicken) *biriani* that Shams and others had made at home especially for the occasion.

After sweeping the floor, some bed sheets were laid in the middle of the shop where the congregation would sit later on. Several incense sticks were lit to give a nice ambiance.

It was past four-o-clock and there were roughly twenty people – all men[7] – waiting at the door for Kari, the *imam* of the Bangladeshi prayer room. Among those present were Anisur and Mukitur, two of the first Bangladeshis to arrive in Portugal, the pioneers; several Keranignajis, among which were some of Sham's school colleagues; and other acquaintances. Not long after, the *imam*, arrived and all those present respectfully greeted and followed him inside the grocery shop. Kari, Mukitur and Anisur, took off their shoes and sat facing the door of the shop followed by the congregation. Everybody was facing them in a small closed circle when Mashiur sprinkled the rose water over the group.

Kari began the ceremony by making a small prayer followed immediately by some *nats*, some praised litanies in honour of Prophet Muhammad, parts of which were repeated by the congregation. He ended with a *du'a*, a supplication to God, regarding the success of Shams business. Just after Shams, Moina, Mashiur and Manir gave some *shinni* to the present, starting with the prayer leader and the two pioneers, and then proceeded to the remaining participants. Some passers-by, seeing what was happening, came inside and also received some *shinni*. Soon after everybody left, Shams and helpers stayed behind to clean up.

But one then has to ask: "What is really problematic about such an apparently simple ritual that caused so much tension in the conversation I was having with Ishmael?"

[7] In terms of composition and although some authors, referring to other contexts like Turkey (Tapper & Tapper 1987), and even to South Asia (Qureshi 1996), have acknowledged the presence of women only *milads* and others where men and women share the same ceremony, although in separate rooms, all the aforementioned *milads* were exclusively male events with the frequent presence of children of those who could not attend.

"Purists", "traditionalists" and the foundational texts

The polemic around this ceremony arose on another occasion. The context was a visit from a Bangladeshi *imam* (whom some of my interlocutors called *"maulana"*, recognising his knowledge) of one of the ten mosques located in New York dominated by Bengali speakers (Mohammad-Arif 2000). He had gone to Spain and, before returning to the U.S.A., the commission for the Bangladeshi mosque in Lisbon invited him to come over and give a homily (*bayan*). After the *bayan*, he decided to do a *milad* and a collective recitation of some hymns in honour of the Prophet. Near the end he stood up doing *qyiam*, standing while reciting a *durud* (an Arabic praise litany), and half the congregation joined him while the other half remained seated. Some of the members of the congregation questioned the *ulema* about this and he justified it, saying that standing was a way to pay homage to the great man Prophet Mohammad. After an exchange of opinions, everything got back to normal and the ceremony was finally finished. During the next couple of days, all rumours (*bodnami*) and conversations lead to this polemic, especially among some of my interlocutors that reflect revivalist and reformist discourses. It is commonly assumed that standing up during a *milad* is a tribute to Prophet Mohammad in the sense that it is believed that he joins the congregation and therefore it is a sign of respect. Following the same logic, an empty chair is usually left for him to sit amongst the believers while the *milad* is carried out. For revivalists, both practices – to do a *milad* and standing or leaving a seated space – are problematic, because it presumes that the Prophet is more than a human being, which goes against *tawhid*, the principle of unity of God. Liton is a revealing case: "… in *milad* they say things that are not supported by Islam. They make the Prophet and God the same but they aren't. Sometimes they even leave a blank chair [or stand up] for him. The Prophet is dead and he is in Medina. He cannot come here". Reflecting this view of Prophet Muhammad, later on, he further added that some people travel to the Prophets burial place in Medina and pray beside his grave. He fully supported Saudi authorities whenever they expelled these Muslims from the grave, because for him this worshipping of the prophet was not correct. As he said, "Maulana says he is human, not God". Liton's criticism was specifically directed at the notion of intercession that is behind the performance of these *milads*, criticism that is more generally applied to the *pirism* or the cult of holy man in several parts of the Muslim world based on *wahhabi*[8] arguments. Liton lived part of his life in Saudi Arabia, where he claims to have studied Islam. This experience seems to have given him a *wahhabi*-like position regarding certain issues, especially towards *milads*. For him the *sacred geography of Islam* is intimately linked to Saudi Arabia and therefore the *milad*, as a

[8] The wahhâbi movement is a revivalist, puritanical Sunni movement created in the eighteenth century by Ibn al-Wahhab based on the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya, a medieval theologian that advocated a form of legalism very similar to the Hanbali School of jurisprudence. Wahhab strongly opposed all innovations (*bid'a*) which he saw as having been introduced into Islam by the blind adherence to customary authority (*taqlîd*). This included a strong criticism to the veneration of saints and to everything that was not practiced by Prophet Muhammad and the first three generations after him.

ceremony that he claims is performed only in the subcontinent, has therefore a non-Islamic nature.

Another example is Fazlur, who on the eve of Shams' *milad* and after explaining me what this ceremony was about, added: "… you know I don't agree with the *milads* but I have to come because Shams is my friend and I have to be here". Later on, Fazlur did not attend the *'ulama' mahfil* in the Bangladeshi mosque in 2005, because he had attended a previous event in 2004; back then, the homily did not impress him neither the fact that he did a *milad*. According to him this practice was related to the *pir* (holy man) cult and thus he could not agree with it because he recognised that in the past there were some holy man but not anymore, and thus this ceremony should not be performed. Fazlur was clearly reproducing a modern *versus* traditional rhetoric where all practices related to the holy men were considered a thing of the "past" as against "modern" perspectives one could get from revivalist movements.

For Fazlur, Liton and others, it is further argued that this ceremony had no sanction either in the *Qur'an* or in the *Hadith*. Thus if this was not in the foundational texts then *milads* are innovations (*bida'a*) and therefore should not be performed.

These interlocutors are two good examples of Bengali Muslims who seem to reproduce a revivalist discourse of deobandi inspiration[9]. This connection is evident thanks to the direct relation both Mashiur and Liton have developed with the *Jama'at Tablighi* movement even before they arrived in Portugal. This Islamic movement, created in Deoband, India, in the 1920s, by Maulana Mohammad Illyas (1885-1944), spread the deobandi message for the twentieth-century. It emphasises individual spiritual renewal according to a vision of Islam as a scriptural religion; exclusively based on the main sources of Islamic knowledge – the *Qur'an*, the *Shari'at* and the *Sunna*. Missionary activities have given them a growing importance and visibility worldwide, and neither Bangladesh nor Portugal seem to be unaffected by their influence (Robinson 1988, Dasseto 1988, Metcalf 1996, *inter alia*)[10]. Mashiur, for instance, frequently participated in their *da'wah* activities in

[9] The Deobandi movement was founded by Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi and its focus was a *madrasa* founded at Deoband in Shaharanpur district, northeast of Delhi. Logically, they emphasised the importance of education as a way to be a Muslim in a context – British India – where Muslims had lost all political power. Deobandis had a very limited interest in the state affairs and in the realm of beliefs it was argued that Muslims should follow the *Shari'at* and give a primary importance to the revealed sciences. They only tolerated small Sufi elements, specially those who did not have any relation with any notion of intercession, mostly because Islam was interpreted as a scriptural religion: God's words were essential to understand how Muslims 'should' behave (Metcalf 1982, Robinson 1988).

[10] In the case of what is today's Bangladesh, Deobandi inspired movements like the *Faraizi* and the *Tariqah Muhammadyia* have been quite active during great part of late nineteenth century. Their influence was felt in several areas, like Dhaka, Faridpur, Jessore, Mymenshing, Noakhali, Barisal, Pabna among others, of what was then the British province. In their effort to contest the loss of political importance in British India, these movements developed an ideological project supported on the "purification" of the religious practices of Bengali Muslims; thus all those ceremonies that lacked scriptural sanctions were criticised (Ahmed 1981, 1988; Banu, 1992).

his neighbourhood mosque back in Azimpur, in Dhaka, as well as on the *Biswa Ijtema*, the second biggest pilgrimage place in the Muslim world that is a meeting organised by this movement in Tongi, in the outskirts of the capital. Liton praises the impact of these movements' activities back in his home area – in *Keraniganj* – because they actually changed the habits of some very dubious persons in Gingira, near his *gram* (village). Furthermore, when they are able, they usually participate along with their friends in the *Tablighis* activities whenever they occur all around Lisbon.

But this is only one side of the story. Others, like Mashiur have a more tolerant position regarding this ceremony. When it came to celebrate the opening of his *dokhane*, Mashiur did a *milad*; this time inside the mosque. Furthermore, when we went together to this ceremony performed by a common friend in the context of the inauguration of his new house he immediately told me: "You see *milads* are universal; they are also performed by Malaysians"[11]. With this he was directly contradicting some discourses that argue that the *milads* have an exclusively regional origin. Nonetheless, Mashiur participates in the reformists' activities and, although recognising their importance and piety, he cannot stop wondering that *milads* are something "that people should do if they want to. It is not mandatory but optional". For Mashiur, Shams and others *milads* are seen as ceremonies that have always been done. They are a "tradition" – "something that our forefathers and families did" – that one should not stop performing. The example of Abdullah, one of my interlocutors, is quite revealing: "… those who do not like *milads*, do not like Prophet Muhammad. […] My grandfather did it, my father did it, I grew up with my family doing it, so what is wrong about *milads*? Why should I stop doing it? Sometimes my father does things that are 50 / 50 correct and these I stop doing, but not *milads*". This discussion emerged in a context marked by the preparation to open what he called a "traditional" Bangladeshi restaurant in downtown Lisbon and thus the performance of the *milad* was mandatory – "this [restaurant] wouldn't be traditional without a *milad*".

These seem to be the same segments that organise *milads* whenever a new business is started or a new house. For them it is mandatory and thus the pressure to perform it is quite intense. For instance, after buying a house in central Lisbon, Anwar was being pressured by other Bengali Muslims, especially some friends of his sister, with whom he shares the apartment, to do a *milad* in his house. People wanted to see how his new house was … before him only the pioneers had bought houses in Portugal and thus people were curious about it.

This so called *traditionalist* perspective about Islam, and more specifically about the *milads*, seems to be connected with Barelvi inspired arguments with which the Bengali *imam* from New York had clear affinities. Besides his insistence on the performance of *qyiam*, he published a *kitab*, a religious book, written in Bengali, in which he argued that *milads* were supported in the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*. He was selling the book in the mosque after his *mahfil* and one of my interlocutors bought several. He was going to use it to provoke "a friend that can't bear to hear people speak about *milads*". These postures of the *ulama*, together with some

[11] The inaugurated house – which was also serving as the main office for a company – was the result of a partnership between two Bangladeshi and one Malaysian.

other interlocutors, had clear parallels with arguments presented by Maulana Ahmad Riza Khan (1856-1921), whose writings were very influential for the Barelvi movement. Riza Khan's teachings were based on the idea that Islam should be practiced as it had been handed-down – that is, marked by several customary practices directly linked to the Sufi world of shrines and *pir* (holy-men, saints). One of the central figures in the intercessory practices was of course Prophet Muhammad. If Muslims hoped for Gods' forgiveness they should look for the intercession of the Prophet and thus the celebration of *milads* acquired increasing importance (Robinson 1988). Prophet Muhammad was seen as having several attributes that included his ability to see into the future, to have knowledge of the unseen, to be spiritually – and perhaps physically, if the prophet wished so – present in many places simultaneously, which, of course, justified the importance of *qyiam* during *milad* celebrations in which it was believed that the Prophet was actually present. He supported such arguments with recourse to the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* which gave him the arguments to criticise those, like the Deobandi, who denied the importance of intercession on the grounds of the equality of all believers before Allah who were deemed by Riza Khan to be guilty of arrogance. The message has been spread all over South Asia during the twentieth century. Today one can find several Barelvi-linked institutions not only in various parts of the subcontinent but also among several South Asian populations in several western countries (Mohammad-Arif 2000, Werbner 2003, etc.).

What is interesting, though, is that for these so called "traditionalists", the participation in the *Tablighi da'wa* activities is not contradictory. They continue to participate in these revivalist events and attend the *da'wa* activities that frequently occur in the Bangladeshi mosque. The logic is not mutually exclusive and the perfect example is one of these pioneers that received from a *Mazaar*, the tomb of a *pir*, in Dhaka, a letter with a prayer asking him to send some money to help finance the *pirs* tomb. He did not believe in *pirs*, he told me, and thus he was not going to send any money, although this did not stop him from sticking the prayer to the computer tower in his office. This religious polyvalence is in part based on the belief that nobody knows what the correct path of Islam is and thus one has to listen to everybody, scholars as well as theologians, in order to be prepared for the judgment day, "when God will judge our actions".

Islam as a discursive formation and the lived experience of migration

Based on a previous observation made by Dale Eickelman (1982), William Roff (1987: 18) stated that: "The main challenge for the study of Islam is to describe how its universalistic or abstract principles have been realized in various social and historical contexts without representing Islam as a seamless essence on the one hand or as a plastic congeries of beliefs and practices on the other". Placing the question this way seems interesting, but it is worth suggesting that part of the solution lies in the "notes and queries" from the field. Frequently, the discourses of our interlocutors convey insights about what the "universal" is and what the "particular" is in Islam. In fact, people do speak about what they consider to be the "universal" Islam and how every Muslim should practice it to be a "good"

Muslim and how certain practices should not be done because they are not Islamic. Others, on the other hand, continue to practice these so called "traditional", "local", "particular" practices arguing that these too are Islamic. What we have shown so far is that universal and abstract principles of Islam, exactly like particulars, should be seen as a discourse. To be more precise, most of my ethnographic data lead me to recognize that Talal Asad's (1986) approach is very "good to think about". According to his suggestion, Islam is neither a blueprint for a whole social structure (a criticism that was specifically directed at the work of Ernest Gellner) nor a collection of diverse beliefs and practices. Rather, it should be interpreted "as what Muslims do": as a "discursive tradition" that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*; a "discursive tradition" whose pedagogical practices articulate a conceptual relationship with the past, through an engagement with a set of foundational texts (the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*), commentaries thereon, and the conduct of exemplary figures. These Islamic discursive practices link practitioners across the temporal modalities of past, present, and future through a pedagogy of practical, scholarly, and embodied forms of knowledge and virtues deemed central to the tradition and its reproduction (Asad 1986: 14). It should be clear, of course, that when Talal Asad speaks of discursive engagement with sacred texts he is not only talking about scholarly commentaries alone but also the practices of ordinary Muslims that invoke the sacred texts to solve practical problems, like the cases presented above. In the words of Saba Mahmood (2005: 116):

> "… by emphasizing the practical context through which foundational texts gain their specific meaning, Asad shifts from an understanding of scripture as a corpus of authoritatively inscribed scholarly opinions that stand for religious truth, to one in which divine texts are one of the central elements in a discursive field of relations of power through which truth is established."

Besides Talal Asad and Lila Abu-Lughod's theoretical approaches and reviews, it is quite easy to find several ethnographies that rely on such approaches. In particular, Robert Launays' *Beyond the Stream* (1992) showed how in a neighbourhood in *Korhogo* city in Northern Côte d'Ivoire, competing discourses existed about Islam that reflected more universalised and particularised practices and positions. Another example is the ethnographic material collected and discussed by John Bowen (1993) in Indonesia. Here "modernists" and "traditionalists", in the words of the author, competed with each other for the definition of what was and what was not Islamic. Finally one should consider the recent ethnography of Saba Mahmood (2005), where the author shows the ways in which women engage the foundational texts in Egypt's contemporary mosque movement. Other examples also reinforce the point that such a perspective is important to research on Islam and Muslims. But if such a theoretical position has been so well developed and reproduced in several ethnographies produced in many Islamic contexts, then why is it that when one faces the literature on Muslim migrants it seems to be missing altogether?

A good example to start with is the excellent work of Werner Schiffauer (1988) regarding Anatolian Turks and their changing religiosity. After doing an initial period of field research in their home village in Anatolia, the author goes on to follow his interlocutors as they become *gastarbeiter* (guest workers) in West Germany.

Having examined religiosity in their home country he compares that experience with what happened to their practice of Islam in Germany. He concludes that the migration experience, mainly the fact that these Turks were living in a non-Islamic context, caused an increasing "islamization of the self" when compared to what happened in their home communities. The relation between migration and Islam, then, could be thought of as an *internal conversion*, to use Clifford Geertz's (1978) metaphor: for the Turkish migrants, migration led to an increasing "rationalization" of Islam along universal lines in Berlin, as against the more inculcated and localized versions of traditionalists, still prevalent in Anatolia. Migration, then, was the driving force for changes in conceptions and interpretations of Islam among Turks.

Schiffauer's approach was perfectly in tune with the theoretical and the methodological perspectives of his time (Watson 1975, Kearney 1989) but his approach raises some doubts first and foremost because of his model of change. He assumes that Islam in Anatolia was a static system that was waiting to be changed by some external force. This force, in this case, was the migration to West Germany. Furthermore, his comparison assumes the existence of two static states, the "before migration" and the "after migration", as if things were frozen in the middle. I have to agree with Gerd Bauman when, in a recent book (1999), he critically reread Schiffauers' research, arguing that competing narratives about Islam might have their origins not so much in the diaspora but among urbanized populations that never actually left their home country. His criticism implies that one has to face several elements, sometimes internal and sometimes external, to understand these processes. Migration might be one of them, of course, but most surely it is not the only one. Indeed what we have seen so far is that among recently arrived Bangladeshi migrants in Lisbon there are different discourses about Islam: some that could fall under "purist" and "universal" perspectives and others falling under the more "traditionalist" and "particularist" rubric; Both surfaced around the same ceremony: the *milad*.

Furthermore, what is interesting is that these debates are present in several areas of what is today's Bangladesh. For instance, in areas that have been particularly affected by reformist and revivalist movements like Pabna district, more specifically in Daripalla, Thorp (1978) remarked how the *Milad-un-Nabi* is not celebrated, "except for a few houses". More recently, Jean Ellickson (2002) and David Garbin (2004) showed how Islam in Bangladesh vacillates between these two positions. On one side, it is possible to find the conservatives, revivalists, supporting purist perspectives of Islam and criticising everything which is apparently related to *pir* and their *mazaars*; on the other, she makes a description of liberal interpretations that continue to rely on the notion of intercession and on the charismatic character of some holy men.

Even today this is still a hotly debated issue and a simple look at the English language press in Bangladesh – e.g. the *Daily Star* and the *Bangladesh Observer* – before and after the celebrations of *milad-un-nabi* is quite revealing. A very good example was a letter written to the editor of the *Bangladesh Observer* in October 2004:

> "A controversy seems to have erupted around the celebration of the birthday of our holy Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) on the 12th Rabiul Awal. Some call this cel-

> ebration 'Bedat'. It is true that during the period of Hazrat Mohammed (SM) no such birthday celebration was observed. So naturally the celebration of the birthday in a sense is 'Bedat'. The Celebration of Milad-un-Nabi was most probably started by Muslim scholars of the Indian sub-continent. It is not practiced even in Saudi Arabia. Apart from the 12th Rabiul Awal, Milad-un-Nabi is celebrated on any day of the year for 'barkat' of Allah. Bedat most probably means something new which was not in vogue during the early days of Islam. So, is this 'Bedat' not beneficial? Birthday celebration cannot be called a non-Muslim function. It is just an expression of joy and gratefulness to the Almighty. Milad-un-Nabi is a social gathering having many more benefits. […] It should not be discouraged out of single mindedness. Maulanas should be imparted modern knowledge also along with Madrasha education so that they can come out of their preconceived notion. I hope people who celebrate Milad-un-Nabi out of love and emotion will be rewarded by Almighty Allah."

So even in today's Bangladesh, the *milad* is still a controversial ceremony based specifically on different interpretations of what Islam is and of what Muslims, as such, should do. This of course raises the hypothesis that some of the arguments used in Lisbon, among Bengali Muslims, could be drawn from the same controversy that exists in their home country and for this it is essential to trace the genealogy of the arguments, as I just did. But this is not enough. It is also important to understand in what contexts, for example a political context they are used. How is this knowledge put in action in everyday contexts? To what extent are these competing narratives political? By political I mean to put them in their existing contexts; one surely has to know how these practices and arguments relate to the (social, economic and political) world around them, as Gilsenan (1982) so aptly demonstrated in *Recognizing Islam*. As Talal Asad (1986), Lila Abu-Lughod (1989) and Gregory Starret (1997), among others, have also argued, these discourses and practices do not stand above historicity or sociability; on the contrary, they have a context that should be characterized, namely through, who says what, in which circumstances and based upon which historical arguments. In other words "… attention must be paid to the interplay between these everyday practices and discourses and the religious texts they invoke, the histories of which they are a part, and the political enterprises of which they partake" (Abu-Lughod 1989: 297). In order to understand the political context it is absolutely crucial to understand the relation between this ceremony, the discourses produced as a consequence of it and several socio-economic factors.

An example is the excellent ethnography on migration and transformation in rural Bangladesh, namely in Sylhet district (Gardner 1995). Her argument is that returning migrants, whether they were just visiting or retiring were responsible for the introduction in that region of Bangladesh of purist and universalistic rhetorics around Islam and for criticisms of how local practices were not Islamic and therefore should be abandoned. This, her argument goes, was because of the contact of these migrants with other non-Bengali Muslims either in London or in Riyadh, two important migration locations for Bangladeshi, which had produced a perception, or in the words of James Fernandez (1982), a "religious imagination", which emphasised the universality of Islam. For Sylhetis, to practice a *purist* Islam was not only a sign of piety but also of economic success and status towards those who stayed in their villages of origin.

The parallel between this case and the controversy over the *milad* in Lisbon is striking. Let us go back to the field. By the very occasions in which it is supposed to be done, the *milad* seems a *status* reinforcing ceremony, namely making visible several social hierarchies, this time based on who is now a *patrão* (boss in Portuguese), who now has his own house, etc. It reinforces the pioneer's *status* and thus it seems to be a ceremony where hierarchies are reinforced and sublimated. Katy Gardner's (1995: 237) observation in *Talukdar* village *(gram)*, in the Northwest district of Sylhet, could be applied to Bengali Muslims in Lisbon: "… not surprisingly, it is only the more prosperous households which can afford to hold a *milad*". For Mashiur, Shams and Abdullah, the performance of the *milad* makes visible and legitimates their success and thus their status.

For others, mostly recent arrivals, like Fazlur and Liton, the performance of the *milad* legitimates a hierarchical vision of society which contradicts the "basic" principles of Islam, they would argue. With such comments they seem to be criticising the pioneers and their dominant position. Recently arrived Bangladeshis are partially dependant on the pioneers' to have a job or a loan and this sometimes leads to an inescapable social control.

Thus, what is implicit in such debates seems to be the positions from where one is speaking: pioneers, to whom the *milads* show their success, and freshies, as they are known, to whom such ceremonies represent not only their vulnerabilities towards other *established* Bangladeshi but also the gap between their migration projects and expectations and their lived experiences as "immigrants".

To show how religious concepts are used to express the structural realities people face is also a way to see the political aspects of such debates among Bangladeshi in Lisbon.

Some concluding remarks: old wine in new bottles?

What I am suggesting, then, is that studying Islam as a discursive formation specifically among migrants allows one to see beyond the apparent modernization rhetorics concerning social change and transformations in religious practices and religiosity. The emphasis is not so much on what is changing at the level of religious practices (Islamic in this case) but a kind of phenomenology of Islam, where one can see how Islam is lived by migrants; and how it helps our interlocutors to think about the world they live in. We can of course argue that this is an essentialist argument because I am assuming that nothing changes. But in fact this is not the case: the interest is not so much on continuities and transformations but on the relation between Islam and migrants' experiences.

My hypothesis is indeed that religion is not baggage but a sextant, like Gerd Baumann (1999) proposed, and therefore something that gives ones position regarding the world. Thus it is something that is never still, it is in perpetual change as are the lives of subjects. It is "immanently dialectic", as Dale Eickelman (1976) once suggested. Here things are not static, there are several voices that differently manipulate and define Islam according to its relation towards the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*, defining this way who is the "good" and who is the "bad" Muslim. Now in a changing context marked by increasing mobility, the reactualization of reli-

gious ideas and concepts is, for some, a way of making sense of the world and finding one's own position in it (see also Metcalf 1984, Ewing 1988).

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